

Room 19

By George Stephens VE7YF

Some of our readers across the country may be graduates of 'Room 19' at Vancouver's King Edward High School back in the 30s and 40s. The legendary Walter Lambert was both honoured and feared by young people studying for the coveted 'radio operators licence'. His personality and methods were, to say the least, unorthodox, yet he not only turned out first class radio operators, but turned out men of character and ability to fill the need in the days when being a Room 19 man was considered a mark of distinction. A special thank you to the Kamloops Amateur Radio Club's The Inland Net for this gem from the column 'Ask George' ... Editor.



VE7EHT and I received an invitation to attend a reunion of the old Room 19 gang. Not many of you would know what Room 19 was or what it represented but, 50 years ago, saying you were from Room 19 was a passport to broadcasting, shipping, airlines, and the Department of Transport. When applying for a job, the mention of Room 19 usually got the response, "So you're one of the Old Man's boys ... come on in!"

Room 19 was a place. It was a room in King Edward High School in Vancouver at 12th and Oak. It was a place where green young men were inculcated into the mysteries of Radio, with the object of their obtaining a commercial 2nd class certificate which would enable them to enter the world of radio. The students were high school graduates, or those that had equivalent educational qualifications. Some had been away from school for a number of years.

It was the kingdom of Mr. Walter H. Lambert, one of the most powerful individuals I have ever met. He was powerful physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and had a profound effect on nearly all who came in contact with him. At the time, his methods were as unique as the man. His sincere and practical belief that his

course did not just produce commercial radio operators, but men, who amongst other talents, also had their second class certificates.

He not only produced graduate students, but actively pursued employment for them in days when unemployment was the rule rather than the exception. His graduates were not only good employees, but were responsible employees, who were a credit to the communities in which they lived and worked.

The Old Man (as we called him) believed that, if you were well-grounded in fundamentals, then everything else was almost an anticlimax which could be picked up with little effort. He believed that it was every man's privilege, right and duty to communicate properly in the language of his country, in our case, English.

He was deeply religious, and openly practised the tenets of his church. He would not condone profane language, swearing, slang or improper use of the King's English.

He believed that except for Ohm's Law and a couple of simple formulae, the use of algebra, trigonometry, geometry, the calculus or other arts of the mathematical world, were not necessary for a deep fundamental understanding of radio theory and radio phenomena, actually stating that he felt that these mathematical arts were a substitute used by some who really didn't understand.

There were not text books. Each student was expected to take notes and to make up his own text book. One of the grades you received was on your notebook. There was one government publication that we called the *Traffic Handbook* which was issued by the Government of Canada. Every student was expected to memorize, not just understand, this multi-paged tome which covered all the radio regulations governing the radio telegraph service with ships at sea. It not only included the radio regulations, but also the rules for telegrams and the counting of messages for charging.

I memorized this handbook during my many miles of walking to and from school everyday. I lived in Dunbar and, like most students who went to school, walked back and forth every day except in the bitterest of weather.

To bring things into perspective,



examinations consisted of written, oral and practical tests in theory, written and oral in regulations; and five minutes of no-error, 20 wpm CW code, (transmit and receive by handkey and pencil). To prepare his students for this, he gave numerous on-the-spot tests, which made the ultimate government exam look easy.

One of my clearest memories was the very first test he gave to the class I was in. The previous day he wrote on the blackboard a list of 100 conductors and insulators in the order of their conductivity. The next morning when we came in, he boomed out at us: "Put away your notes, you are about to have your first test!"

"Write the list of 100 conductors and insulators!"

He did mention that passing was 60% as we all struggled valiantly to remember what we could of the list, only to find out that the marks consisted of one point for each one right, ten points off for each one wrong! From that point on, homework was attacked with religious fervour.

When he covered a point of theory, he

used to bellow "POINT!" If you understood, then you raised your hand. In the event that you did not raise your hand, a number of things might occur. You would always be singled out for a classic public lecture on your abilities, your lack of attention, and probably some reference to the probable lifestyle you were leading that put you in this condition. You were then expected to explain exactly what part of this rather simple point you failed to comprehend, and why this was so.

Depending on your response, things then progressed to further discussions between him and you, or perhaps he would suddenly stop and select one of the students who had raised his hand and tell him to explain the point to the slow student. If the second student did not respond to the Old Man's satisfaction, he also had his character analyzed and discussed. The procedure may sound brutal, and I guess it was, but after a year of this, Room 19 students were ready for any oral examination.

Code was learned by endless hours of practice between students, with the occasional interjection of a test by the OM to judge progress. His sending, or code fist, could be as sweet as an electronic keyer, or as ham fisted as the worst operator that one might ever encounter. I don't know of anyone failing code when writing the exam. I shudder to think what the OM would say.

One other unique thing was sending and copying code under adverse conditions. The OM didn't believe in any temperature for the classroom except that which prevailed outside at any given time. The large windows were kept wide open, and I still remember code sessions wearing mitts as the cold rain, sleet and snow blew in the window. To this day I am able to send on a hand key in below freezing weather on a wildly rolling ship, sitting down or standing up!

The OM generally lectured while sitting on a long-legged stool on a desk, where he could survey us properly. He kept a supply of short pieces of chalk handy to refocus the attention of any whose attention may have become diverted. His aim was of major league calibre. Should any sign of insolence be encountered, he was not above leaping down from his perch, seizing the culprit by the scruff of the neck and carrying him out of the classroom with his toes almost touching the ground. Lesser violations were occasionally responded to by taking the culprit and pinning him against the wall, with his toes three or four inches above the ground, while he delivered a magnificent analysis of the individual concerned. His command of the English language during one of these sessions was truly worthy of William Shakespeare.

As you can gather, he was a big man, well over six feet tall, with the strength and agility of a star athlete. He kept in shape by going to and from school everyday, in all weather, on a bicycle, from North Vancouver! For relaxation on his holidays, he paddled a canoe from West Vancouver to the West Coast of Vancouver Island. He was not above sleeping in the canoe in the open ocean during the night. Many have reported that maritime bulletins to ships in the area warned them to keep a look out for Lambert and his canoe to avoid accidentally running him down.

Most of the time, he lectured without notes. His sessions on inductance, capacitance, resistance and the interaction of those were truly classic. His explanations of propagation, antennas and solar phenomena were as up-to-date as any published articles of the era. Because of his communicating abilities, he was continually talking with those in the radio business and the professors at UBC. Every lecture was liberally interspersed with practical observations on the use of alcohol, drugs, loose women, swearing, profane language and conduct unbecoming to a gentleman radio officer.

Where did the students go? In my time in the early 1940s, the war was on. There were glamour jobs with the airlines (commercial planes carried a radio operator), with the ferry command, ferrying planes overseas, and there was of course, the Merchant Navy.

Some were called into the service, but as I recall, the bulk went to provide the radio communications services of the Department of Transport in the coast stations, the monitoring stations and at airports.

Regularly, ex-students would come back to visit the OM. On these occasions they would be paraded in front of us, and their success in the world extolled. We would then be subject to a diatribe on how most of us would be highly

unlikely to be a success at anything, let alone the success of this individual.

On each day before our Government exam, he would have a personal talk with each student writing. He gave compliments on the individual's progress and how he truly felt that if anyone was ready, it was that individual. When I write it down this way, it sounds corny. But you know to this day I believe he was honest and sincere.

I could fill many pages with anecdotes, but will close by saying that my own life was largely shaped by this larger-than-life Old Man. He was a hard-working teacher who believed in what he did with the fervour of the most dedicated evangelist, and who exercised his God-given talents to not only teach radio, but to teach many of the things that have resulted in most of his students becoming true human successes in the world. I for one, am proud to say, I am an old room 19er! ■

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